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ABSTRACT

Using a personal anecdotal style, this paper describes ethical conflicts that occurred during a study conducted in a kindergarten classroom in which the researcher was a passive observer. The paper is framed around an incident observed by the researcher in which a kindergarten student was stigmatized as an outsider and mistreated by his peer group. The discussion of the researcher's role as a passive observer in a classroom stresses the need to capture the natural social setting of the classroom. The paper explores the ethical paradox of passive observation research. By avoiding intervention on behalf of a victim, a researcher can maintain objectivity and provide descriptions and analyses that have the potential to ultimately help victims; or a researcher can assist a victim in a sample of subjects being studied, but will thereby alter descriptions and analyses. (MM)

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ETHICAL CONFLICTS IN A STUDY OF PEER STIGMATIZATION IN KINDERGARTEN

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Ethical Conflicts in a Study of Peer Stigmatization in Kindergarten

In this essay, I describe ethical conflicts connected with a participant observation and interview study done in a kindergarten classroom. I frame my discussion around a confrontation that took place between me and an unknown classroom teacher during a presentation of my findings from the study at AERA. In the study, a boy I called Lester emerged as a powerful example of one who was stigmatized as an outsider and treated as "less than normal" by his peer group. Having listened to my detailed description the social construction of Lester's outsider status, the teacher from the audience asked why I had not intervened in support of Lester.

In the essay, I detail my answer to the teacher, discussing my role as a "passive participant observer" trying to capture the natural social setting of the classroom. I note that at the time I was doing the fieldwork I did not know that Lester was going to be the focus of the intensive analysis that evolved and that the teacher was a very competent, caring person who was aware of Lester's social difficulties. After this explanation, I tell why my answer is still not completely satisfying to me today. The teacher in the audience was right to ask the question; I was wrong to not ask it of myself sooner. I will summarize with my current thoughts on the ethics of researchers intervening on behalf of children.

AERA 1986

The American Educational Research Association meetings were in San Francisco in 1986, but I was much too nervous to enjoy California. I was presenting three papers and, although I had presented at AERA as a graduate student, I was still unable to sleep or eat because of my anxiety at presenting my work. My way of handling my nervousness is to imagine the worst scenario--the most scathing criticism, the most difficult question, the most damaging comment--and construct in my head a way to save face so I can leave with some dignity in tact. With three papers to present, I had three different sets of "worsts" to preoccupy me. Of course, my way of dealing with anxiety is not healthy, but worse, in the session in which I presented a paper entitled, "Learning to be an outsider: Peer stigmatization in kindergarten," it did not work.

As is common at AERA, this paper was only loosely connected to others in my session. When it was my turn, I talked some about my study and read from the paper, including some excerpts from children's conversations among themselves that provided evidence that one child in the class (Lester) was being defined as an outsider by his peer group.

The session discussant was a substitute and my memory was that her comments were mildly critical, not very threatening, and framed in a way that did not make me feel like I had to defend myself in order to leave with my head up. However, when the audience of about forty was invited to ask questions, a woman (I do not know if she identified herself as a teacher or if I just assumed she was) stood and asked me a question that never entered into any

of my worst case scenarios: "If you knew Lester was being stigmatized by his classmates, why didn't to do something to intervene on his behalf?"

As she was asking the question, I knew she had me. Even while my mind was racing to construct an answer that would satisfy the moment, my heart was sinking because I knew I had missed something important as a researcher, as an early childhood educator, and as a person. In all the hundreds of hours I had poured into the study, I had never asked this question of myself. Writing this essay gives me a chance to try to address this question and deal with the sinking feeling that has stuck with me since that afternoon in San Francisco.

The Study

The study was the third classroom investigation I had undertaken to examine, as a passive participant observer, the social behavior of kindergarten students in child-to-child interactions. I spent most of the second half of a school year sitting in a half-day kindergarten, recording fieldnotes, collecting classroom artifacts and other unobtrusive data, and interviewing teacher and students. As data were analyzed, the behavior of Lester and of other children in the classroom in relation to Lester became a focus of the study. Later data collection and analysis were designed to reveal patterns of interaction within the peer group that, in effect, stigmatized Lester as "less than normal." The findings of the study are analytical descriptions of Lester's "rule breaking" behaviors and classroom peers' "group responses" to him (see Hatch, 1988).

What seemed important about the study is its interactionist stance (Becker, 1963; Erickson, 1966; Goffman, 1963) that takes Lester's stigmatization to be constructed within the norms and expectations of his peer group, not merely as a consequence of Lester's personality, physical features, or actions. The group and Lester participated in the construction of his less than normal status.

Lester's rule breaking included "aggression" toward peers, "teasing," and "contact incompetence" (poorly developed strategies for making positive contact with peers). Group responses in the study included "exclusion" (denying entry to previously established groups) and "snubs" (individual negative responses to Lester as an interaction partner). The study, it seemed to me, had the potential to help teachers, researchers, and others interested in social behavior understand children exhibiting social difficulties in a different way, to focus attention on group processes and definitions rather than individual problems and apparent deficiencies.

The AERA paper and the article reporting the study are full of excerpts that offer evidence for the hypotheses of the findings. I will include one extensive except here to give a flavor of Lester's interactions with peers. In addition, I want to use this incident to discuss my researcher role later in this essay.

> Sam and Steve have a set of Lego blocks, and Lester comes to the place where Sam and Steve are playing and sits down on the edge of the group. He reaches across what they are building, picks up a piece from the box and adds it to their construction. Steve: "Don't." Sam: "You're breakin' it." (When Lester put the piece in, it separated another set of pieces).

Frank comes and stands between Steve and Sam. Lester to Frank: "You can play." [We'll both join.] Frank looks at Sam to see if it's OK. [I don't see Sam's reaction but I see Frank sit down.] After Sam sits down, Sam says to Lester: "Only three can play." Steve: "Yea, only three. You have to leave." Sam: "I'll decide. Frank, what does your name start with?" Frank: "F." Sam: "Steve, what does your name start with?" Steve: "S." Sam: "My name starts with S. OK, S's and F's can stay." Steve to Lester: "You gotta leave." Lester looks down but does not move. Steve repeats: "You gotta leave. Only three can play." Lester continues to look down and says nothing. Steve: "I"ma tell the teacher." Sam: "OK, I'll decide. Go to your seats and I'll call who can play." Steve stands up and starts to leave. He looks over his shoulder and sees that no one else is leaving and returns to a standing position next to the group. Sam to Frank: "Go to your seat so I can call you." Frank: "No." Steve repeats: "Only F's and S's can stay." Sam: "OK, only those with red on can stay." Each boy checks clothing and announces: "I got red." Lester: "I got red." Sam tries another color: "Who's got white?" Lester points to his T-shirt and says: "I got white." Sam: "That doesn't count. You gotta be wearin' it." Lester continues to check and sees white in his plaid shirt and says: "I got white." Sam continues to go through the colors [in what appears to be an exercise in getting Lester out of the group]. Lester does not leave but stays on the outside of the group. Occasionally, he reaches across to keep pieces in play. At one point he says: "Let's build a big house." Steve responds: "We already are.

> You can't stay." Another attempt by Lester was to pick up a toy lawn mower and say: "I'll mow the yard." (He acts as if he is mowing the rug with the mower.) Steve's response: "You can't stay. I'ma tell the teacher." (Hatch, 1988, pp. 67-68)

My Answer

I'm not sure how coherent my answer was. I was stunned and embarrassed by the teacher's question. I acknowledged the importance of the question and mumbled something about having to think carefully about the implications, then made my pass at responding. I noted the connections of my work to what Spradley (1980) calls "passive participant observation." It was my goal, I explained, to be present in the social contexts I study, but to do my best not to influence the natural flow of social interactions among kindergarten peers. If I was to capture children's naturally occurring social behavior, I could not intervene.

I emphasized that my fieldwork was not exclusively focused on Lester and interactions that involved him. I was still interested in larger social interaction patterns in the group and trying to maintain a broader perspective while paying close attention to settings in which Lester was involved. If I changed my passive role and tried to help Lester's situation, I argued, I would give up not only the naturalistic analysis of peer stigmatization, but an analysis of "secondary adjustments" that was emerging as well. In fact, given the way I defined my research role at that time, to intervene would

be to violate the basis for my claim to be recording and analyzing naturally occurring social behavior.

I also explained that the teacher of the studied classroom was an excellent and especially sensitive person who was aware of Lester's difficulties with peer relations. In both formal and informal interviews, the teacher described relations between Lester and peers in terms that paralleled my observations in the classroom; in fact, her interviews provided a powerful source of triangulation for my other data. My reasoning was that here was a fully competent, caring teacher who knew that Lester was having problems. What could I do that this expert teacher was not already doing?

As I was answering, I knew I was not just throwing up a smoke screen to cover my escape. My reasons made sense within the research framework I had learned and taken as my own. What this question ultimately has done is forced me to critique my research framework. Not intervening was problematic, but what frightened me was that I had never even considered such an intervention. That my way of thinking about and doing research would lead me to such a position stopped me dead in my tracks.

Voyeurism and Values

Roman (1989) and Tobin and Davidson (1990) describe a voyeuristic dimension in qualitative research. As I have thought about my studies in early childhood childhood classrooms, I have come to accept the uncomfortable notion that at some level I have acted as a voyeur. The long excerpt above, an interaction in which Lester was clearly excluded by his peers, offers an example of how

voyeurism played out in the study under examination in this paper. I have many memories of interactions in the classroom, but I remember the incident recorded above especially clearly. I remember it as a turning point of the study.

The boys were playing on the rug in the front of the room. I had stationed myself at the side of the Writing Center less than five feet from the center of the boys' activities. I could hear their conversation clearly and see the faces of all except one child facing directly away from me (Sam). I had been in the classroom for several weeks by this time, and I have no evidence that these boys did anything differently because I was so close to them.

I remember a distinct feeling of exhilaration as it became clear how the interaction was going. My heart was beating fast and I knew I was getting "good data." I even remember my mind saying, "You are having a strong emotional reaction to this interaction, so you better be extra careful to record it accurately." I even felt a kind of smug pride that I had the presence of mind to remember an old article by Schwartz and Schwartz (1955) that warned researchers to bracket their emotional reactions when powerful data were being gathered.

So there I sat, writing as fast as I could, intently involved in accurately capturing the conversation before me, and feeling emotionally and intellectually stimulated. I knew this was a great example of a "Lester as outsider" thesis and I knew, for the first time, that a close analysis of Lester's status in the classroom group would be an important part of the study. I felt lucky that I was in the room that day and lucky that the interaction was taking place so

close to my observation station. I also felt a sense of power and satisfaction that I was getting such good stuff. I wish I could say that some part of me felt what I feel now, sadness and anger for the way Lester was treated, but my memories are only of the thrill of the voyeur being in the right place at the right time.

The feelings I have now about my voyeurism are parallel to the feelings I have when I see human suffering captured in newspaper or magazine photographs or in television video records. When I see news reports of suffering children or adults in agony, I wonder why the photographers and reporters are not trying to help instead of doing their best to capture the horror as vividly as possible. My guess is these professionals experience the same kind of exhilaration I did as I was fulfilling my role as a professional researcher. I'll bet they can feel it when the shot is powerful. I'll bet their hearts beat fast and they become especially intent on making an accurate record. I wonder if they ever consider intervention, spoiling the impact of their story, but perhaps helping a fellow human in distress.

The Researcher's Ethical Paradox

Peshkin's (1978, 1986) analyses of a rich variety of social settings have taught me the importance of paradox in understanding the construction of roles, norms, and values in any social group. In some ways, you can know groups best by the paradoxes they keep. Qualitative researchers (like photographers and journalists) have access to sensitive situations and information that others want to (and probably should) know about. The paradox comes from the

tension between providing descriptions and analyses that have the potential to raise awareness and ultimately help victims, and significantly altering descriptions and analyses in order immediately to assist the victims being studied.

Labov (1972) described the "observer's paradox" as the dilemma of trying to capture naturally occurring behavior in the unnatural context created by the presence of a researcher. That paradox obviously holds here as well, but the ethical paradox I am describing is larger. It is not just a matter of influencing the behavior of those we are studying by our proximity and record making, it involves the issue of active intervention when we see that those we are studying are at risk. I think researchers should be struggling with this paradox. I am concerned that many researchers, like me in the Lester study, do not.

I can not speak for others, but I can confess why I think I overlooked the tension that should have moved me to consider intervening on Lester's behalf. I see three related factors that kept me from confronting this ethical paradox sooner: my own selfishness, being caught up in the moment, and my view of the "superior" nature of the researcher role.

In terms of selfishness, I recall having a meeting with a school district administrator (who happened to be a friend) as I was trying to arrange permission to do my dissertation study. As we talked, the administrator asked how my study would benefit the district. As part of my response, I joked: "Because it will make me famous." This was a different study and it really was a joke--I have always known that the audience for my work is small and highly specialized. Still,

the pattern in my thinking, then and as I did the Lester study, was: "I want to be a researcher" (later, "I am a researcher"); "I need to be doing research"; "I need a site in which to do research." I defined part of my professional identity as a researcher interested in studying children's peer social relations. Another major part of that identity was (is) "tenured university professor." I internalized the value system of the research university and saw doing research as inherently good and my doing and publishing research as inherently necessary. If becoming a tenured, full professor at a university that valued research meant "famous," then I was doing research to make myself famous. These selfish ends helped prevent me from seeing myself as engaged in an ethical paradox. I was on the scene to do research, so questioning the value of that activity never came up.

As a doctoral candidate and as a new assistant professor, I was so intent on doing what I thought of as quality research that I rarely stepped back and reflected on what I was doing or what it meant. While I was doing the Lester study, I was teaching several classes (all of which were new preparations), I was advising a large number of undergraduate and graduate students, and I was serving on department and university committees. I was doing what most new assistant professors do at the same time I was completing a labor intensive participant observation study. I did not have time (or make time) to contemplate the ethical implications of my work--I was too busy <u>doing</u> my work. I was a prisoner of the moment-to-moment preoccupations of doing the research and my other faculty work, placing myself in a position to be justly challenged by the teacher who confronted me at AERA.

A third "blinder" was my view of research as superior to other activities. Holding this view kept me from seeing the importance of consulting directly with the teacher about what might be best for Lester. The "integrity" of the research was more important than the teacher's interactions with her students. I felt a kind of superior vantage point from which to "look down" on what was happening in the classroom. After all, I was generating knowledge that might offer some new understandings into the day-to-day life of children like Lester in classrooms like the one I was studying. That superiority helped keep me from seeing Lester as a person (ironically, one of the goals of the study) and from seeing the possibilities for making his immediate day-to-day conditions better.

I think it is a paradox. I see two sides to all of these issues. I think research has something to contribute to our understandings of what goes on in the everyday worlds of children and adults. My embarrassment comes from admitting that until the teacher pinned me, I did not see any dilemma. My selfishness, my myopic concentration on the moment-to-moment dimensions of my professional life, and my inflated notions of the importance of research caused me to miss a meaningful understanding of the paradox before me.

Conclusions

This is a personal story and the conclusions are personal to me in this situation. I have learned from dealing with the ~~anxiety~~ unearthed this story reveals to try to invest more anxiety on the front end of a study in order to reduce the chances of facing such anxiety when it's

too late to do anything about it. For me, this means facing my motives for doing a study, attempting to come to grips with the reality of my own self interests. Again, there are two sides here--it's not enough and probably dishonest to say, "I have no selfish interests in my research." I want to get my selfishness out on the table and balance it with the other forces surrounding the study, including especially the needs and expectations of those I am lucky enough to study.

I want to be more reflective as I do my work. I do not want to become so caught up in the doing of the work that I forget to stop and check my feelings and perceptions and thoughts about the work. Again, I don't want to get to the end of the work, then discover that something vital to the research was overlooked because I was so busy with the moment-to-moment press of doing qualitative research. Even keeping a research journal is not necessarily sufficient (I was trained to keep such journals). Unless some real distance from the research process is generated and some very tough questions are asked, writing in a journal can be just a written version of focusing on the immediate.

I want to keep research and my role as researcher in better perspective. I want to trust the good judgement of participants in the settings I study rather than assuming that they can not offer helpful insights into the research and especially into the findings of the study as they emerge. In this study, I particularly wish I had taken my data and my analytic generalizations, however tentative, to the teacher and discussed how we should proceed.

Finally, I want to find ways to get in closer touch with my feelings as studies progress, to trust those feelings, and to act accordingly. I have had feelings of remorse since the confrontation with the teacher at AERA. As I have noted, the main source of my guilt is that I never recognized I was dealing with an ethically paradoxical situation. I want to be a fully human and caring individual as I do my research, not just a data collecting instrument. I want to know my feelings and trust them to guide me to do what is right for those I study.

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